

Important literary critic Walter B. Rideout described the books of Upton Sinclair as comprising "one of the great information centers in American literature." Another much-admired critic, Granville Hicks, centered in on the quality that gave Sinclair the ability to be such a detailed and credible recorder of the world around him: "Sinclair," Hicks wrote, "has always had the ability to withdraw himself from the struggle and to write with an astonishing degree of objectivity."

But even those critics who praised his ability to capture events in words still acknowledge what Rideout referred to as his "artistic limitations." Rideout pointed out a discrepancy between Sinclair's fictional structure and his social message, explaining that they were separated from one another, instead of complimenting each other the way they should in a good work of art. Hicks, after marveling at his objectivity, recognized that Sinclair's writing, "if seldom downright bad ... is not very distinguished." Even though he wrote his review during Sinclair's lifetime, he considered the author's works to be "historical fiction" because of the way they were meant to leave a record of the times. That, in Hicks' view, was the source of the problem: as he explained, "flatness of character is, I think, an inherent defect in the genre in which Sinclair is writing." In other words, even a really great writer would have trouble creating well-rounded characters if limited by the facts of history, and Sinclair was even more limited by his undistinguished talent.

One last area of contention comes from those who have disagreed about the level of objectivity in Sinclair's writing, and about how well it served the causes he supported. Few writers have openly criticized Sinclair for his support of the workers against people of privilege, and many have been willing to overlook the problems with his writing because they have considered him to be an overall positive influence. One critic who refused to give him any consideration for good intentions, however, was Van Wyck Brooks. Brooks rejected the claim that Sinclair's books recorded objective reality, pointing out that complete objectivity is impossible: "Mr. Sinclair, like the rest of us, has seen what he wanted to see and studied what he wanted to study." Since the world Sinclair presented to his reader could not be exactly the same as the real world, Brooks tried to describe what Sinclair's world was really like, characterizing it as one where "all the workers wear halos of pure golden sunlight and all the capitalists have horns and tails." Sinclair's supporters might still claim that it was his right to present reality as he saw it, but Brooks went even further, explaining that Sinclair's greatest failure was in not doing what he himself had set out to do: instead of showing workers to be proud and independent, Brooks claimed, Sinclair's oversimplifications made them look helpless and naive, like infants. The implication of Brooks' critique is that he personally supported the working class as much as Sinclair did, but that he did not think it did any good to overstate their problems or to understate their abilities to cope.

## **Criticism**

### **Lewis Carroll Wade**

*In the following excerpt, Wade examines the fallacies upon which Sinclair based his disturbing novel The Jungle.*

There is no doubt that *The Jungle* helped shape American political history. Sinclair wrote it to call attention to the plight of Chicago packinghouse workers who had just lost a strike against the Beef Trust.

The novel appeared in February 1906, was shrewdly promoted by both author and publisher, and quickly became a best seller. Its socialist message, however, was lost in the uproar over the relatively brief but nauseatingly graphic descriptions of packinghouse "crimes" and "swindles." The public's visceral reaction led Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana to call for more extensive federal regulation of meat packing and forced Congress to pay attention to pending legislation that would set government standards for food and beverages. President Theodore Roosevelt sent two sets of investigators to Chicago and played a major role in securing congressional approval of Beveridge's measure. When the President signed this Meat Inspection Act and also the Food and Drugs Act in June, he graciously acknowledged Beveridge's help but said nothing about the famous novel or its author.

Teachers of American history and American studies have been much kinder to Sinclair. Most consider him a muckraker because the public responded so decisively to his accounts of rats scurrying over the meat and going into the hoppers or workers falling into vats and becoming part of Durham's lard. Many embrace *The Jungle* as a reasonably trustworthy source of information on urban immigrant industrial life at the turn of the century. Few raise questions about Sinclair's credentials as either a journalist or historical novelist. If doubts arise, they are quickly dismissed....

Drawing on old records and new scholarship, this article looks first at Sinclair's motives for writing the novel, then compares what he says about packers, packinghouse products, immigrant workers and their community with the historical evidence. It concludes that contrary to the author's 1906 claim that it was "so true that students may go to it, as they would a work of reference," *The Jungle* often strays quite far from the truth. As a result, the book misinforms readers about life in what Sinclair called "Packingtown" but which residents and reporters knew as "Back of the Yards."...

Capitalist packers were the most fearsome monsters in Sinclair's jungle. They were "the incarnation of blind and insensate Greed ... devouring with a thousand mouths, trampling with a thousand hoofs." They could live in the lap of luxury because they cheated cattle raisers, set high market prices on their meat products, bribed federal inspectors to pass diseased animals, and chiseled on workers' wages. To them [as Sinclair records in his *Autobiography*] "a hundred human lives did not balance a penny of profit." Their plants were "honeycombed with rottenness": "bosses grafted off the men" who in turn were "pitted against each other." As a result, Packingtown "was simply a seething cauldron of jealousies and hatreds; there was no loyalty or decency anywhere." Female employees, "mostly foreign, hanging always on the verge of starvation," were at the mercy of foremen "every bit as brutal and unscrupulous as the old-time slave drivers." Things "quite unspeakable" went on in the packinghouses and "were taken for granted by everybody; only they did not show ... because there was no difference in color between master and slave."...

Those in the path of the Chicago packers fought a noisy rear guard action. Dairy farmers called margarine a "cheap, nasty grease" capable of transmitting tuberculosis and trichinosis. Congress placed a modest tax on it in 1886, but the Department of Agriculture's Division of Chemistry pronounced it safe and nutritious. As Chicago chilled beef invaded eastern markets, local slaughterers and butchers dubbed it "stale" or "dead" meat, implying that it absorbed ammonia from cooling machinery or was chemically "embalmed" to prolong its life. Customers liked its superior taste and lower price and thus ignored the

warnings. Opponents then accused Chicago packers of using diseased animals and said only local inspection in their own states at the time of slaughter could safeguard consumers. Several states banned Chicago beef, but the Supreme Court overturned these laws in 1890. Meantime, European countries banned American pork products until the federal government certified that they were free of trichinae. Congress in 1890–91 authorized the Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Animal Industry to inspect livestock before and after slaughter and, at the request of packers or foreign governments, conduct microscopic examinations of pork before certifying it. The large packers quickly availed themselves of this service, and by 1900 federal meat inspectors, graduates of veterinary colleges and protected by civil service, were working in 149 packinghouses in 46 cities.

Criticism of Chicago meat products surfaced again during the Spanish-American War. General Nelson A. Miles, still smarting from the packinghouse workers' insolence to his soldiers during the Pullman strike, blamed the sickness of American troops in Cuba and Puerto Rico on the canned meat and chilled beef prepared in Chicago. He told [as noted by Louise Carroll Wade in "Hell Hath No Fury Like a General Scorned," in *The Illinois Historical Journal*, Autum, 1986] the War Investigating Commission that the former was defective, the latter what "you might call embalmed beef." Major General Leonard Wood, trained at Harvard Medical School, testified that the chilled beef was nutritious and wholesome, while academic and government chemists (including Dr. Harvey W. Wiley, chief of the Division [later Bureau] of Chemistry from 1883 to 1912) gave clean bills of health to samples of the canned beef. After visits to the packinghouses and voluminous testimony, the Commission declared that the canned beef was "generally of good quality" and that "no refrigerated beef ... was subjected to or treated with any chemicals." Undaunted, General Miles asked for a military court of inquiry into his beef charges. It ruled that Miles had no justification for "alleging" that the beef was "embalmed" or "unfit for issue." These two investigations revealed that careless handling of the refrigerated beef and the practice of eating canned meat opened days before contributed to intestinal illnesses, but drinking contaminated water was the major factor. Medical doctors and researchers soon tracked typhoid to poor sanitation and pinned malaria and yellow fever on mosquitos. Despite exoneration of Chicago meat and scientific explanations for the illnesses, historian Graham A. Cosmas [in his book *An Army for Empire*, 1971] concedes that the "sensational charges, not the sober refutations, stuck in the minds of thousands of ordinary citizens."

Foes of the packers kept the rotten beef charges alive, and, as Floyd Dell noted, this "more or less prepared" the public for *The Jungle*. Simons rejoiced that "the world knows now the story of the infamous part played ... by the packers of Chicago." Charles Edward Russell asked "How did they manage to emerge unharmed from the terrible 'embalmed-beef' revelations of the Spanish War? How did they escape prosecution when more American soldiers fell before their deadly beef than were hit by all the Spanish guns?" *The Jungle* claimed "the 'embalmed beef' ... killed several times as many United States soldiers as all the bullets of the Spaniards." And in May 1906 Sinclair issued a press release stating that Philip Armour's 1901 death was due—not to pneumonia—but to "worry incidental" to hushing up the company's responsibility for those deaths....

Another aspect of food safety was the question of whether meat and milk from tubercular cattle could infect people. When Dr. Robert Koch discovered the bacillus in 1882, he thought it caused the same

disease in man and beast. No one knew how tuberculosis was transmitted, but veterinarians advocated stringent livestock inspection as a public health measure. While doctors did not rule out infection through meat or milk, they thought cooking meat and boiling milk could eliminate the risk. Since they suspected the White Plague spread through lung discharges of sick individuals, they emphasized disinfection of premises and careful disposal of sputum so it could not dry out, pulverize and travel through the air. Disagreement sharpened after Koch declared in 1901 that bovine and human tuberculosis were caused by different bacilli and conjectured that people seldom if ever contracted tuberculosis from cattle. American doctors generally supported Koch, and some even suggested that money spent on livestock inspection be used to identify and treat patients. Most veterinarians and many British doctors disputed Koch, and insisted, as did Dr. Daniel E. Salmon, head of the Bureau of Animal Industry from 1884 until 1905, that "No slaughter-houses should be allowed to operate without inspection." Ironically, there was widespread agreement that thorough cooking rendered all meat safe, even pork, and the Bureau of Animal Industry began phasing out microscopic examination for trichinae in 1902, abandoning it completely by 1907.

Meantime, those seeking environmental factors in the transmission of tuberculosis decided that it was endemic in dark, crowded slums and workplaces and spread from there. Explained Robert Hunter, the germs "live for months in darkness or in places artificially lighted" and eventually become "pulverized dust which is blown about through tenements, theatres, street cars, railway trains, offices, and factories." Dr. Alice Hamilton of Hull House also fingered "germ-laden dust ... whirled in the air by gusts of wind." Back of the Yards physician Dr. Caroline Hedger insisted that in the interior packinghouse rooms with electric lights "germs could live almost indefinitely unless removed." She found it "revolting to think of the chances for infection of food in a situation like this." Adolphe Smith believed that the "sharp angles, nooks, and corners" of the packinghouses harbored "sputum of tuberculous workers ... for weeks, months, and years" and that the disease was "especially prevalent" among packinghouse workers. There was a distinct possibility, therefore, that the packers were exporting "the bacilli in the provisions ... sent from Chicago all over the world."

*The Jungle* effectively heightened fears about contamination and adulteration of packinghouse products. In the novel men and women labor in "dark holes, by electric light." Many cough incessantly, spit at random, and stack meat in sputum on the floor. The packers are said to prefer tubercular cattle because they "fatten more quickly." They hire "regular alchemists" to concoct meat products out of knuckle joints, gullets, skins, moldy scrap ends and those poisoned rats, appropriately spiced, colored and preserved. Other illustrations were excised by Doubleday. One involved an unmarried worker who gave birth in a "dark passage" and dropped the baby "into one of the carts full of beef, that was all ready for the cooking-vats." Black strike-breakers (with "woolly heads" and "savages" for ancestors) spread "diseases of vice" in the canned meat, "loathsome" afflictions which caused fingers and parts of the faces "to rot away and drop off." In *The Brass Check*, Sinclair professed "bitterness" when he finally realized that he "had been made into a 'celebrity'... simply because the public did not want to eat tubercular beef." But in September 1905, when he was trying to persuade Macmillan to publish the manuscript, he assured them that "with the spoiled meat sensations that are in it ... you can count upon making the book a success."

President Roosevelt, supplied with advance copies of *The Jungle* by Marcosson and Sinclair, was concerned about the accusations against federal inspectors and the implications for public health. He asked the Department of Agriculture to investigate, and early in March a committee visited eighteen Chicago plants that used federal inspection and three that did not. Its report provided detailed information about the inspection service and the physical conditions within the plants. The investigators found good, fair and bad conditions, often within the same plant and sometimes in the same room. In one establishment, for example, there were dirty windows and unpainted walls in the hog-killing area but clean workbenches and a clean vitrified brick floor. The cattle-killing area had "good light and ventilation," tiled side walls, but dirty overhead beams. The beef-canning section was "well whitewashed, lighted, and ventilated, and was clean," although the cooking room had dirty meat receptacles and no fans to carry off the steam. There were dressing rooms, lockers and wash basins for some but not all employees. Some toilets were "clean, well flushed, painted, and whitewashed," others "dark and insanitary." The plants not using federal inspection were generally unsanitary throughout [as recorded in "Report of the Department Committee on the Federal Meat-Inspection Service at Chicago," by the Bureau of Animal Industry, in *Annual Report*, 1906].

Annoyed by the report's detail and refusal to generalize about sanitary conditions, the President felt that it did not give him "clear, definite answers." So he asked the same men to address specific criticisms in Smith's *Lancet* articles, Sinclair's novel and Hedger's forthcoming article. The committee tried again to explain to Roosevelt that sanitary conditions were uneven. Hedger's charge of excessive dirt fit "certain rooms of certain establishments, but it is absolutely unfair as a generalization." Sinclair "selected the worst possible condition which could be found in any establishment" and "willfully closed his eyes to establishments where excellent conditions prevail." The novelist's assertion that poisoned rats went into the meat hoppers was a "deliberate misrepresentation of fact [according to the "Supplemental Report on Certain Publications Reflecting on the Meat Inspection," Bureau of Animal Industry, *Annual Report*, 1906]." They also took this opportunity to call attention to Adolphe Smith's statement: "When a carcass, or a portion of a carcass, is condemned, in spite of stockyard gossip and scandal, I believe that it is conscientiously destroyed." Smith also had "some difficulty in believing" stories about the use of bruised hams and defective meat.

The President sequestered both of these April reports, for he had dispatched Commissioner of Labor Charles P. Neill and James B. Reynolds to make yet another investigation. Interestingly, both men had toured the stockyard and packinghouses on previous occasions without registering any complaints about procedure. Neill and Reynolds spent several weeks in Packingtown but delayed writing their report until commanded to do so the first weekend in June. In [the U.S. Congress, House Documents, No. 873 "Conditions in the Chicago Stock Yards"] the authors say they verified everything by "personal examination." They did find dirty windows, floors, workbenches and meat receptacles, some toilets improperly located and unsanitary, and many rooms that were poorly ventilated. They were critical of the use of electric lights: "Most of the rooms are so dark as to make artificial light necessary at all times." They did not mention rats. But they departed from their own guidelines to hypothesize that aged meat "might be treated with chemicals" and to say that unidentified physicians thought tuberculosis "disproportionately prevalent" among packinghouse workers.

Briefly and grudgingly they acknowledged seeing clean brick and cement floors, model cooling and meat storage facilities, and eating rooms for the women in the packinghouses. Federal agents conducted the post-mortem inspections "carefully and conscientiously" and examined hog flesh under microscopes with "great care." In a section of the report headed "Uncleanliness in handling products" they buried their approval of the entire chilled-meat operation:

After killing, carcasses are well washed, and up to the time they reach the cooling room are handled in a fairly sanitary and cleanly manner. The parts that leave the cooling room for treatment in bulk are also handled with regard to cleanliness.

When called before the House Agriculture Committee, both Neill and Reynolds said their criticisms applied only to the canning and preservation of meat. Packinghouse workers were "a strong, sturdy class of foreigners," not tubercular wrecks, and they saw clean rooms and sanitary metal carts, tubs and cutting tables "in quite a number of places." Asked about their relationship to Sinclair, Reynolds replied, "We had letters from Mr. Sinclair, and he sent parties to us to give evidence." We "made an attempt to verify certain statements, but found it impossible to do so."

During the last week of May, Sinclair fed his scary version of what would be in the Neill-Reynolds [May 26, 27, and 28, 1906] report to the *New York Times*—plants "overrun with rats," lard made from hogs that had died of cholera, food prepared by "ignorant foreigners or negroes" who had "no knowledge" of sanitation. Roosevelt's June 4 letter accompanying the actual report stressed the negative and ignored the positive observations because "legislation is needed ... to prevent the possibility of all abuses in the future." The House Agriculture Committee finally forced the President to release the two Department of Agriculture reports, but the newspapers gave them short shrift. Nor did anyone ask why Dr. Wiley had found "so little to criticize and so much to commend" in Packingtown, or why so many visitors and journalists trooped through the plants without mentioning unsanitary conditions, or how millions could consume Chicago meat without ill effects. Said the *Outlook* [on June 9, 1906], "the suspicion that poisoned, diseased, and putrid meat is packed and distributed for the use of the American people has ... spread widely—not to say wildly. Even if this suspicion is unfounded, nothing but Federal legislation can allay it." And so Congress bowed to public opinion and the President's wishes and endorsed the essence of the Beveridge bill extending federal inspection to all parts of the packinghouses.

If *The Jungle* misrepresents packers and packinghouse products, it is even more misleading about the workers and their community. In order to prove that they exist in an "inferno of exploitation," Sinclair lets bosses, realtors, merchants, politicians, priests, saloon keepers and the midwife cheat the Rudkus clan. Jurgis is "helpless as a wounded animal, the target of unseen enemies," his wife too child-like to cope, and stolid Elzbieta, the linchpin of the group, reminds him of "the angleworm, which goes on living though cut in half ... she asked no questions about the justice of it, nor the worthwhileness of life in which destruction and death ran riot." Little wonder the journal published by the packinghouse workers' union called the novel "greatly overdrawn" and objected to a plot in which the immigrants experience "only slavery, injustice and death" [as reported in "Amalgated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen, *Official Journal*, May, 1906].

Sinclair wanted readers to believe that packinghouse workers were "rats in a trap," that prostitutes fared better than "decent" girls, and that "if you met a man who was rising ... you met a knave." John R. Commons of the University of Wisconsin studied the Chicago packinghouse workers in 1904 and described the great variety of jobs commanding wages from 15 cents an hour for new unskilled hands to 50 cents an hour for the highly skilled "butcher aristocracy." He found [as noted in his article "Labor Conditions in Meat Packing and the Recent Strike," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, November, 1904] that Irish and German newcomers in the 1880s had moved up, "accumulated money," and were fanning out into other jobs. Bohemians dominated the skilled ranks, while newly-arrived Slovaks and Lithuanians filled the lower positions. He did meet one Slovak who had been in Packingtown for ten years and "worked himself up to a 50-cent job." Another academic investigator, Carl William Thompson, studied the district in 1906 and came to similar conclusions. Even laborers were able to save part of their earnings, and "Slovak and Lithuanian girls working ... at the low wage of five dollars a week also save a considerable fraction of their income." A recent study of Chicago's low-wage women workers who chose to live apart from family and relatives found that most managed to do so. Ernest Poole's protagonist [in Antanas Kaztauskis's autobiography dictated to Ernest Poole from "Lithuania to the Chicago Stockyards," advanced from five dollars per week in his first job to eleven dollars per week and said that was "very common. There are thousands of immigrants like me."...

The novel's impact upon readers in 1906 assures its place in American history. As John Braeman so aptly said, "During the excitement aroused by Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, the federal government stepped forward as the defender of the public well-being." But is the book "journalistic novel writing," as Sinclair claimed? Mark Sullivan rejected it as muckracking journalism and referred to the author as a "propagandist." Stockyards area resident Ralph Chaplin considered it "very inaccurate." And Mary McDowell, more familiar with the packinghouses and neighborhood than either Sullivan or Chaplin, said the novel "was filled with half-truths." In a review [published in the *New Republic* on September 28, 1932] of Sinclair's first autobiography, Edmund Wilson ventured the opinion that he chose sides "before he knew what it was all about" and the resulting "vision of good and evil at grips in all the affairs of the world ... would always have prevented Sinclair from being a first-rate newspaper man."

Does *The Jungle* have value as historical fiction? While novelists have the right to give free rein to their imaginations, the historical novelist needs what Cushing Strout calls a "veracious imagination." Sinclair does not meet Stout's criteria [as found in his book *The Veracious Imagination*, 1981]—respect for "both the documentable and the imaginative without sacrificing either to the other." Turn of the century evidence buttressed by recent scholarship exposes the many ways in which Sinclair loaded the dice to convince readers that packinghouse workers led heart-breaking lives in a capitalist jungle. In the process he distorted the truth about the packers and their product and about immigrant workers and their community....

**Source:** Lewis Carroll Wade, "The Problem with Classroom Use of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*," in *American Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 2, Fall, 1991, pp. 79-101.